

The Next Generation of Agricultural Education

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As Alice in Dairyland, I work in the unique space of agriculture between producers and consumers. As consumers are increasingly interested in where their food comes from, producers are likewise concerned about finding help to share their message.

I'm often asked the question, "How do we keep the next generation interested in careers within agriculture?" In today's world where the average person is three to four generations removed from the farm that provided their ancestors food and clothing, finding a workforce that has a background in agriculture is certainly a concern. The next generation does not have the same perspective as their parents or grandparents.

However, they shouldn't have the same perspective. The word "agriculture" in relation to future careers has evolved over the decades to encompass many opportunities for the next generation. Journalism, engineering, pharmaceuticals and medicine, marketing, and computer science are all vital threads in agriculture.

Today, one in every nine jobs is related to agriculture in Wisconsin, which makes an \$88.3 billion economic impact on our state. With a generation that is further removed from production agriculture than ever before, we need to reintroduce agriculture into people's lives in a way that captivates while providing context. So the question becomes, how do we meet the future generations where they are at with their perspective, and open their eyes to the endless possibilities?

During graduate school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I had the opportunity to serve as the teaching assistant for our introductory animal sciences course. The majority of my 120 freshmen did not have a background in production agriculture, but each week we held a three-hour lab where they were able to work with livestock using a hands-on approach. These labs took students out of their traditional lecture seats where they experienced agriculture first-hand.

On a weekly basis, my students were trimming sheep hooves, cracking open and grading eggs, and handling day-old piglets. They were even able to reach in to the rumen of a cannulated cow and feel the waves of digestion. One of my students was from Chicago and had never even approached a dairy cow before. As the semester went along I watched him become more confident, asking more questions, and becoming increasingly fascinated by agriculture. By the final exam he was considering options for future careers in animal science. This was not an exception, as many students went along a similar journey.

In order to help people discover the endless possibilities in the world of agriculture, we need to continue to provide opportunities to experience it first-hand. By incorporating a broad range of skills into these activities that require the use of technology, teamwork, and problem-solving, agriculture becomes a relevant career for anyone.

Incorporating active learning into classrooms is increasingly important, and organizations out of the classroom such as FFA and 4-H are integral inspiring future generations. If we provide beneficial agricultural education, our future generation will provide innovation, creativity, and inspiration.